

**NEVADA COUNTY  
OFFICE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES**

**REASON FOR INVESTIGATION**

A citizen complaint was filed concerning the Nevada County Office of Emergency Services, (OES). The complaint alleged Nevada County was not prepared to meet the needs of its residents.

**PROCEDURE FOLLOWED**

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed Director of Nevada County Emergency Services Dennis Cassella, the regional coordinator of OES for California, the chief of the California Department of Forestry for Nevada County, the battalion chief of the California Department of Forestry emergency command center for Nevada County, the assistant director of OES for Placer County, the duty sergeant of the Grass Valley office of the California Highway Patrol, the Nevada County OES representative for Truckee and the complainant.

**FINDINGS**

1. OES is a division of the General Services Department. The director of general services also serves as the director of OES. There are two other county employees assigned to OES. All three employees carry out their OES responsibilities on a part-time basis.
2. Most emergency calls are processed through the county 911 system, which is operated by the Sheriff's Department. The system is staffed on a 24-hour, seven-day week basis. Few calls go directly to the director of emergency services. There are times when the director of emergency services is not available. When this occurs the 911 personnel use a call list to locate the next person responsible in the OES chain of command.
3. The Grand Jury found that responsibility for OES in California is placed with the sheriff departments in 23 of California's 58 counties and nine place the responsibility with the county fire departments. Sixteen are placed with county administrative offices and the 10 remaining are placed in planning, health or other miscellaneous organizations. Nevada County is the only county with the OES in the General Services Department.
4. The Grand Jury determined that prior to the 1996-1997 flood there was very little organization or training of staff. This condition existed for almost two years following an undeclared emergency in January 1995 that resulted in hazardous waste flooding the containment ponds at the county landfill and significant road damage. The January 1997 emergency created by severe weather conditions resulted in the county opening the OES center for the first time. OES and other supporting agencies came under criticism for their management of this emergency. As a result of this experience, the OES management convened a meeting of the participating agencies to develop a "lessons learned" document. The key points were the need for:

- a larger OES area separated from usual county business activities
- additional equipment e.g. computers, restricted phones and radio communications
- an organized phone alert list
- a formal process for notification of participants
- clearly defined duties of county personnel assigned to OES
- formal training in state designed OES seminars
- a designated public information officer

5. The director of emergency services has developed a written emergency action plan that follows state recommended contents and organization. The final plan was completed during the Grand Jury's investigation in December 1997 and was approved by the Board of Supervisors at that time. A complementary copy was sent to the California State OES for comments. The plan was accepted as written.

6. Nevada County OES has developed a room for emergency operations, where personnel can conduct their activities without being hindered by other county business.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

1. Nevada County OES has taken action to correct and improve the emergency action plan using feedback from the "lessons learned" meeting following the 1997 emergency.
2. The Grand Jury finds it difficult to understand why it required three years for the director of OES to develop an action plan. During the extended time in developing a plan there was a declared emergency and a hazardous waste problem.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The Grand Jury recommends that the OES director plan, schedule and conduct annual field exercises that simulate a local emergency with participating organizations.
2. The Grand Jury recommends the director of OES recognize that longer range planning is required. It is not acceptable to wait until a new emergency occurs to determine if the plan is adequate and that all participating organizations understand their specific role.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Director of OES  
Due August 30, 1998